The Reality of the Imaginary

Architecture and the Digital Image

Jörg H. Gleiter

I am honored to welcome you all to the 10th International Bauhaus Colloquium. More than 30 years have passed since the 1st Bauhaus Colloquium was held in 1976. The first conference was held in honour of the historical Bauhaus in Dessau and its 50th anniversary. Since then, the focus of the colloquium has shifted from history to theory, and towards contemporary architecture and its critical reassessment. Since 1992, the agenda has included such topics as *Techno-fiction* (1996), *Global Village* (1999), and *Medium Architecture* (2003). Our topic this year is *The Reality of the Imaginary—Architecture and the Digital Image*. Together, we shall find out what this means, in specific terms. Let me briefly outline some of the ideas and perspectives that motivated our choice of this topic in the first place. I hope my remarks will serve as a catalyst for further discussion of the contributions, opinions and ideas that will be presented here over the next four days.

Digital Culture and its Discontents

Let me begin with a simple observation. Architecture has always had, and always will have, its starting point in the imaginary. Architecture is always preceded and anticipated by an expression of imagination. This has held true throughout the long history of architecture, from the temples of Egypt to the digital age, from the pyramids to the virtual materiality of Jun Aoki's design for Louis Vuitton and the *blur building* of Diller and Scofidio at the Swiss Expo on Lake Neuchatel in 2002.

However, we must find means to make the imaginary visible to our external senses in order for it to be communicated. Usually this is achieved by means of visual images, and accordingly, visual images play a very important role in the imaginary process of architecture.

To this end, architects make extensive use of various imaging techniques. In the past decades, for example, architects such as Aldo Rossi, O. M. Ungers, James Stirling, Peter Eisenman and Bernhard Tschumi have all developed their own imaging techniques. Although they developed very distinct methods of analysis, they all proceeded from the assumption that images are more than just representations. There is the typological approach of Aldo Rossi; there is the design method of O. M. Ungers, which draws on metaphors and visual analogies; there is James Stirling's postmodern collage technique—to name just a few. Others we might mention include MVRDV's diagrammatic and performative design processes and the de- and reconstruction technique employed by Peter Eisenman and Bernhard Tschumi.

As a matter of fact, right from the discovery of perspective in the 15th century and the invention of Cartesian space, the imaging techniques used by architects have always been more than just techniques of representation. Friedrich Nietzsche once said that all our writing tools also work on our thoughts. How true this is also for the field of architecture! Drawing on different imaging techniques—whether pencil, watercolor or the click of a mouse—design processes transcribe a certain cultural logic onto the body of architecture, be it Cartesian rationality, the logic of serialization inherent in modern mass production, or the deconstructivist logic of fragmentation, blurring and grafting.

And today, by integrating the latest digital imaging techniques into the design process, architecture is actively realigning itself within the constantly changing force field of culture, repositioning itself to secure its fundamental function as the central symbolic form of contemporary culture.

On the other hand, imaging techniques are not only employed in design processes. They are also of significance to the history of architecture, since architectural history largely consists of the history of its representation in various media such as ancient frescos, paintings, photographs, books, films, and videos.

Walter Benjamin once pointed out the particular importance of images for cultural history by observing that "history disintegrates into images, not into stories." And indeed, images are equally significant to the history of architecture, which in its turn also "disintegrates into images, not into stories." Benjamin also remarked on how visual images, photographs and memories freeze history into single, snapshot-like moments, referring to the "frozen dialectic" of the image. Similarly, we might refer to a frozen dialectic when it comes to conventional techniques of representing architecture, a freezing of a complex whole into a few disjointed parts because the imaging techniques we use only allow us to represent that whole from a few angles and perspectives.

However, while Benjamin thought of images as merely reproducing or mirroring reality, we must ask ourselves whether this still holds true in the digital age. Unlike older techniques of visual representation that were based on mimetic processes,

digital technologies increasingly impose their own logic on architecture. The architect's hand is gradually replaced by the intermediate action of the mouse click, thus threatening the once undisputed role of the architect as master of the design process and author of the final design. This has given rise to a new discontent in contemporary architecture culture, or more precisely, a new discontent in digital culture.

But beyond this, there seems little doubt that the new virtual worlds we see on screens are increasingly taking hold of our personal image memory. The images from monitors, screens and various displays are increasingly repressing and replacing traditional images. The virtual worlds of computer games and imaginary worlds like *Second Life* unsconsiously influence our perception of the real world. Today there is much evidence that we are locked into a kind of reversed mimetic process, in which the bizarre visual realms of computer games, the iMac world and iPod aesthetics are permeating and dominating people's imaginations to an ever greater degree.

Only recently, the architectural office BeL (Leeser and Bernhard) completed a building in Poland that seems to be a true translation of the iMac aesthetic straight into the realm of architecture. Its fascination derives from the sharpness and brightness of this digital aesthetic. A more prominent example of this kind is the work of Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa. Their Kanazawa Museum and building for the Zeche Zollverein seem inspired by the cold colors of screen worlds. The excessive brightness blurs the spatial semiotics of architecture. All the projects mentioned respond to the total invasion of our personal image archives by myriads of digitally remastered images. There is a wealth of evidence indicating that we increasingly perceive the world through the filter of images provided by digital media.

Incidentally, the first generation of students whose social and aesthetic eduction was largely mediated by the Internet and computer screens is just about to enter architecture school. This is likely to have a major effect on the discipline of architecture. Once again it was Walter Benjamin who first described the profound transformations our visual perception underwent at the beginning of the Modern age. Back then, it was the logic of machines and machine production that transformed our perception of the world, eventually resulting in the advent of modern art, modern architecture—and especially, the new art of the moving image, film. In today's digital age, film and video are in competition with digital screen worlds and their technology.

The Narcissistic Injury of Modern Architecture

At this point we may note that digital images are by no means of only minor relevance to architecture. As digital imagery inscribes itself into the body of architecture, the very nature of architecture is about to change. However, among architects there is still great resistance and skepticism towards digital images.

Why do architects seem so reluctant to address the question of the image in architecture? Why is even the slightest association of architecture with the image so controversial? To answer these questions, one needs to delve deep into the history of modernism. To put it plainly: I am convinced that the image constitutes the repressed unconscious of architectural modernism. And, after all, modernism appeared on the stage of the 20th century as an iconoclastic movement.

In architectural terms, modernism is virtually synonymous with a phobia about images—or, in other words, a fear of ornamentation. Modernism started at the beginning of the 20th century with the repression of the ornament. The negation of representation was considered a cultural indicator of modernity. Here we hardly need recall the debate on ornamentation around the turn of the century in Vienna and the polemic distortion of the title of Adolf Loos's famous book *Ornament and Crime,* often quoted as *Ornament is Crime*. The book's actual title notwithstanding, some scholars have even concluded that Loos's true conviction was in fact that ornamentation was a crime.

Undoubtedly, both the early modern disputes about ornamentation and architecture's uneasiness in regard to the question of the image in the digital age arise from the same source: what I would like to call this the narcissistic injury inflicted on architecture in the modern era. We might note that it is the digital media technologies that are challenging architecture's claim to the *production of space*. It is clear that today's digital technologies are capable of producing more complex spatial arrangements than is architecturally feasible. With the development of 3D interfaces, with CAVE technology and breathtaking renderings of virtual space, we cannot but admit that digital imaging technologies are successfully competing with architecture in the production of space.

This raises the question of whether we shouldn't perhaps speak of two narcissistic injuries inflicted on architecture in the modern era? After all, history shows that modernism started with an attack on architecture's most ancient *raison d'etre*: representation. For thousands of years, architecture was doubtlessly the foremost representational art, giving concrete expression to the eternal order of the cosmos as well as to the secular power of worldly

rulers. Only after the appearance of modern mass media was architecture forced to compete with media as photography, film and advertising that challenged its sole claim to representation. Confronted with modern mass culture and its means of representation, architecture responded by redefining itself. This repositioning was attempted by conferring new value to its cultural status as one of the foremost art forms and shifting its focus from representation and ornament to space. By thus turning itself into "*Raumkunst*" or "spatial art," architecture tried to save itself from being reduced to a modern mass medium and maintain its traditional claim to monumentality.

Instead of facing the challenge of the *digital revolution*, architecture has in recent years tried to redeem itself by shifting its focus towards its material and phenomenal presence. As an immediate reaction to the rising flood of images and virtualization of architectural space in the 1990s, architectural debates focused on the material presence and the sensual and physical aspects of architecture. Only a few years before, in the 1980s, in the aftermath of architecture's *linguistic revolution*, theoretical discourse had focused on architecture as a sign. But with the advent of computer-aided design in the 1990s, this interest in semiotics soon faded. Instead, atmospheric presence and authentic sensual experience were discovered as the remaining genuine features of architecture. After having lost its centuries-old claim to representation in the early 20th century, architecture was about to lose its sole claim to creating space as well. With digital worlds asserting increasing competence in the production of space and spatial effects, architects regarded it as necessary to save architecture by declaring it the hard edge of a world considered to be giving in to the disintegrative pull of digital image technologies. In this sense, we can speak of a second narcissistic injury suffered by architecture at the turn of the 21st century.

Personally, I am convinced that architecture can only become a truly modern cultural practice if it overcomes this double narcissistic injury. Only by addressing the question of the image will architecture succeed in establishing a continuity of discourse between the three major categories so central to the concept of architecture: representation, space and physical presence.

Architecture as an Epistemological Metaphor

The current discourse on the digital image and its relation to architecture necessitate not only the reconceptualization of the debates on ornamentation in the machine age, but also shed new light onto the linguistic revolution in architecture in the 1960s and thereafter.

At the end of the 1960s, at the peak of the crises of modernism, it was Manfredo Tafuri who pointed out that it is essential for architecture to incorporate the cultural logic of its era "so intimately as to become an epistemological metaphor." Only by doing so, according to Tafuri, could architecture preserve its function as a symbolic form. His idea of the symbolic form was based on the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer and Erwin Panofsky. Tafuri held that in any respect architecture constituted a transformation process of giving form to the epistemological metaphors of its respective time. In this regard he demanded a "critical value of the image" for architecture.

It is clear that Tafuri identified the crises of modernism with the repressed consciousness of the image. Contrary to the adherence of modernism to functionalism, technology and constructivism, Tafuri insisted on its cognitive function, i. e. its metaphorical surplus. Referring to Palladio, he pointed out that architecture has to transform the cultural logic into—to use his terms—the "expressive potential of the image." None other than Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe were quoted as prime examples. Tafuri had special praise for Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavillon, and in particular for its big glass windows, which Mies used like picture frames. Through the isolating effect of the frames, he succeeded in turning nature into a still life, into a modern *nature morte*, thus turning architecture into a metaphor for the machine age. In other words, Mies managed to transform organic classical ornamentation into a truly metaphorical and thus critical image of the machine age.

By imbuing the image with critical significance, Tafuri distanced himself from the attempts to interpret architecture as a system of linguistic signs popular at the time. According to Tafuri architecture was about images and less about signs in the linguistic sense. Thus he criticized Robert Venturi for his one-sided reduction of architecture to a linguistic sign, as well as Peter Eisenman for his poststructuralist reinterpretation of architecture as a text.

Today we may conclude that the question of the image has its prehistory in the ornamentation debates of early modernism and the postmodern reading of architecture as a linguistic sign. And we felt it was imperative to put this question on the architectural agenda and make it the prime topic of this conference. Every now and then the dynamics of our cultural force field demand renewed and fresh theoretical reflection on architecture in its cultural function as an epistemological metaphor. No doubt the new digital mass media will provoke major changes in the cultural force field.

The Imaginary, the Real and the Symbolic

If the imaginary is the key to understanding today's changing cultural force field, we need to ask: what exactly is its function in regard to architecture? Does the imaginary merely stand for the unreal, while architecture stands for the real, for material presence and objecthood? I doubt the imaginary can be conceptualized as the dialectical opposite of the real. Perhaps it might be better understood in terms of a triadic relationship between the imaginary, the real and the symbolic. Let us briefly look into Martin Seel's book *Aesthetic of Appearance (Ästhetik des Erscheinens)*. Here the imagination is defined as an aesthetic act of envisionment. According to Seel the imagination differs from the real insofar as the imaginary is not accessible to external perception. The imaginary is the exclusively private act of envisionment. It is through images that the imaginary opens up to external perception thus making itself available to discoursive reflexion. Images distinguish themselves from the imaginary through their discoursive, i. e. semiotic quality.

Seel holds that imagined objects are things that have no immediate physical presence. Although if we have physically experienced them in the past, or there is the possibility that we might in the future, we can call the imaginary objects real objects. In this sense imagined objects can be real objects even though they are not physically present. On the other hand, they must be called unreal, as Seel holds, if there is no corresponding external sensory experience, neither in the past nor in the future. For example, when I think that the ball out there in the garden is yellow, but then find out that it is actualy red, the yellow ball in my imagination is an unreal imaginary object.

This example may serve as an almost perfect metaphor for the architectural design process. Using visual images, i. e. sketches and drawings, architects attempt to bring imagined objects from the unreal into the real, thus making them communicable. There are at least two ways to do this. One is to make the imagined object feasible. This is achieved by gradually turning our scribbles and sketches into line drawings, plans and sections. This is the more technical approach. The other is through historical reference. By referring to history, architects can turn imagined unreal objects into real objects because of the real experience we may have had with them. This is a common practice in metaphorical, typological or historicizing design methods.

The point is that the question of real or unreal in architecture is not primarily a matter of construction, but is decided at the drawing table or on the computer screen. This means that for architects visual images appear more real than physical buildings. If this is true, the question arises as to where actual, physical buildings are located in the triad of the imaginary, the real and—as we have already seen—the symbolic. To answer this, we have to go back to Tafuri's concept of the epistemological metaphor and the critical value of the image, and broaden its conceptual base through Jacques Lacan's phenomenology of the imaginary. Clearly, as an epistemological metaphor architecture is located in the side of the symbolic, very much in the sense of the Lacanian symbolic order, in so far as in its symbolic order architecture represents the trauma of the Lacanian "repressed real." Doubtlessly, the repressed real today, as already mentioned, is very much linked to the trauma of modern architecture, which was initially caused by the new mass media of the first machine age, and today is linked to our present-day digital mass media. Thus it is hardly surprising that now, by turning architecture into an epistemological metaphor, as Tafuri suggested, and subsequently turning it into a symbolic form, much in the sense of Cassirer and Panofsky, architects are further shifting the focus from the real to the symbolic. Exclusively by means of images, architects turn the unreal imaginary into a real imaginary object and further into a symbolic object, i. e. into an epistemological metaphor.

Weak Ontology

Let me come to my last point. It is not surprising that digital images are increasingly interfering with architectural practice and casting the world in their mold. As I pointed out, this has to do with the way culture works in general. In other words, posing the question of the image in architecture doesn't arise from an avantguard impulse at all.

However, let us be clear about one point. With the new image technologies, the fleeting and ephemeral nature of the digital is gaining entrance to architecture, as well. We may call this the *weak ontology* of the *digital habitat*. This is particularly significant since architecture, being firmly grounded in three-dimensional reality, could until recently well be called the last remaining cultural practice that stood for the idea of a strong ontology. Architecture stood for solid construction and inert stability. In short, it stood metaphorically for the stable foundations of culture.

Once architecture has opened itself up to the uncertainty and weak ontology of the digital realm, it will be infected by the ambivalence or self-doubt of modernity. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, modernity means accepting the inner contradictions of culture and resisting the temptation to resolve them. By incorporating the uncertainty of the digital realm, architecture finds itself at a crossroads, finally transforming itself into a modern cultural practice.

In 1948 Sigfried Giedion published his acclaimed book *Mechanization Takes Command*. It tells the

story of modernity as the story of the mechanization of society. For Giedion modernity was still associated with the age of machine production. What would the title of Giedion's book be if he had written it from the perspective of today's digital age? Might he have called it *Digitalization Takes Command*? Let me point out that Giedion never insisted that in the age of machine production buildings had to look like machines. Nonetheless he argued that architecture should incorporate or absorb the cultural logic of its time, transforming itself into an epistemological metaphor, very much in Tafuri's sense. And nothing less is at stake in architecture today, in the age of the *digital habitat*, regardless of how this may be achieved and how this may manifest itself in overall architectural practice.